ECHOES OF THE FOREST:

Uncovering Pre-Sanskritic Layers of the Word "Van"

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Echoes of the Forest/Van: Uncovering Pre-Sanskritic Layers of the Word "Van" (/ʊʌn/)

Abstract

The word 'Van' (/ʊʌn/) is also popularly known as Sanskrit word meaning Van or woodland (ne: वन). But Bantawa, Banjhankri and Bon words used by Kirat community language, culture and religious tales especially of Rai and Limbus mean that the word van/ban could have originated through a more ancient indigenous level of language than Sanskrit.

This article revisits the origin and use of the term "Van" based on comparative linguistics (comparative linguistics), anthropology (ethnography), and oral history (oral tradition). The analysis suggests that Sanskrit may not have adopted the word "Vanam" primarily, but rather assimilated (linguistic borrowing) from indigenous languages such as Kirat-Bon.

This not only calls into question the etymology of a single word, but also points to serious issues such as linguistic colonialism and the grinding and usurpation of indigenous cultural knowledge. Finally, reinterpreting the word "Van" is the restoration of indigenous knowledge traditions.

Keywords: Kirat, Bon Religion, Van Word, Bantawa, Ethnolinguistics, Linguistic Borrowing, Sanskrit Substrate, Mundhum, Proto-Tibetan-Burman, Shamanism, Nepal Indigenous Culture

1. Introduction

A research paper (Rai, 2025) revealed that the origin of Rai Bantawa Thar came from ban + tawa i.e. Van area. In the study so far, I believe that kirat's ancient people's faith was nature worship and soul worship, i.e., the Shanianist Bon religion. Therefore, the words Banjhankri, Ban/Bon/Van, Bantawa (Bantawa) have a deep presence in the Kirat Rai Limbu dictionary. Against this background, I have carried out this research with the intention of examining the origin of the word Van and challenging the established beliefs.

The word "vana" (वन) has been used in Sanskrit as "vanam" from ancient Vedic texts. Although it generally means 'Van' (/ʋʌn/), in Kirat society, the term is used not only as a geographical but also as a religious and cultural symbol. This indicates that the origin of the "Van" cannot be confined to a Sanskrit root alone.

A study of the linguistic and cultural aspects associated with the origin of Bantawa Thar revealed that the origin of Rai Bantawa Thar is 'Ban' + 'Tawa' i.e. the caste coming from the Ban region. It gave me an opportunity to dig deeper into the imagination or curiosity that was playing in my mind. In this connection, I claim that the word 'Bantava' is related to the word 'Bana' associated with nature and soul worship. Based on studies so far, kirat society's ancient religious belief is associated with Bon (Bon) religion—which places nature, spirit, and Van at the center.

While acknowledging the ancient use of the word 'Vanam' in Sanskrit, I would emphasize that in the Kirat community, its use is interpreted as a religious-cultural identity beyond geographical boundaries. This makes it clear that the use of the word 'Van' may not have been limited to Vedic culture but also had an independent meaning and usage in the indigenous Kirat culture.

Therefore, this preface raises two important points:

(a) It is necessary to reconsider the historical, linguistic and cultural origin of the word 'Ban/Bon' in the name of Rai Bantawa Thar.

(b) There is an intellectual challenge that limiting the origin and usage of the word 'Van' to a Mere Sanskrit etymology ignores indigenous knowledge systems and beliefs.

In this way, the preface section here is presented with a clear purpose—that is, to re-examine established linguistic-religious beliefs and to highlight the original cultural semantic structure of the Kirat community.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is based on linguistic and anthropological interdisciplinary approaches. The origin, use, and meaning of the word "Van/bon" have been studied mainly on the basis of linguistic contact theory (Language Contact Theory) and Genesis linguistics (Etymological Linguistics).

In addition, shamanism and indigenous religion theory (Shamanistic Religious Theory) have also been used in this article, specifically to refer to bon religion and Kirat mundum culture, even taking into account the concept of shamanic religion structure propounded by Horton (1967) and Eliade (1964).

Terms such as "Van", "bantawa", and "banjhankri" used in the Kirat community have been studied as linguistic-cultural signifiers, which also links to the language-culture relationship theory (Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis) of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf.

Language exchange and influence has been analyzed through the substratum theory (Emeneau, 1956)—according to which higher languages borrow words, sounds, and structures from lower-level languages.

3. Research methods

3.1. Research types

This study is qualitative in nature, which uses methods of cultural linguistics (ethnolinguistics) and cultural anthropology (cultural anthropology).

3.2. Sources of data collection

Primary sources: oral traditions (mundum) of the Kirat community, Bantawa/Rai linguistic expressions, folklore, songs, jhankri related myths.

Second sources: philological research (van Driem, Emeneau, Masica), texts on Tibetan Bon

religion (Tucci, Hoffman), Sanskrit dictionary (Monier-Williams), etc.

3.3 Methods of analysis

Comparative Linguistic Analysis: A comparative study of the "van/bon/one" sounds used in the Kirat language with the Proto-Tibeto-Burman languages.

Historical Reconstruction (Historical Reconstruction): An attempt to identify the historical transformation of Van-related terms in the Kirat language.

Ethnolinguistic Interpretation: Analysis of the symbolic meaning of the word "Van" in the Kirat community.

3.4. Limits

The lack of evidence recorded in the Mundum oral sources used in this study, and the limitation of the written records of the Kirat language, are major challenges. However, analysis is balanced using oral tradition, cultural continuity, and comparative linguistic evidence.

4. Bon Traditions and Kirat Community

And others, such as the Rai, Limbu and Yakkha and the Sunuwar, are Kirat communities, which settled in the eastern Himalaya of Nepal as well as the adjacent regions of south west Tibet since time immemorial. The cultural and religious identities of these communities are strong and unique because they are

not products of the South Asian religious culture and traditions.

The original and traditional religion of these communities is 'Bon Religion', which is a part of the ancient Tibeto-Himalayan religious tradition and is generally considered older than Buddhism (Hoffman, 1961; Tucci, 1980). At the heart of Bon religion is the Shamani faith system, in which nature, spirit, ancestor worship, and sacred elements of the earth are worshiped. In this religion, Vans, rivers, stones, waterfalls, caves, and mountains are considered not just geographical objects, but as residences of the holy spirit.

The religious activities and rituals of the Bon tradition are deeply related to the word "Van". The Van (ban) is not just a geographical area but a spiritual and cultural mark, where shamans—called 'Nakchong', 'Fedangma', or 'Samba' in Kirati culture—perform rituals that communicate with spirit or nature deities. Such ritual sites are called 'ritual loci', in which caves, stones, water springs, and especially Van areas are very important.

Thus, the cultural consciousness, linguistic structure, and religious practices of the Kirat community all use the word "Van" is based on indigenous intellectualism (indigenous epistemology), not just literal or Sanskrit etymologies. The presence of the word "ban" in surnames such as "bantwa" and its repeated use in oral traditions testifies to the fact that

the word "Van" holds deep cultural significance in Kirat society.

In this context, interpreting the word "vana" only as 'vanam' in Sanskrit or restricting its use to the Vedic context is like ignoring the original knowledge tradition of the Kirats. The use of the term "Van" in the religion, linguistic structure, and cultural memory of the Kirat community demands the possibility and necessary reconsideration of alternative origins.

5. Origin of "Van/Van" sound in Kirat language

Kirat languages—especially bantawa, samsharik rai, and limbu languages—have a remarkable frequency of sounds such as "ban", "Van", or "bon". Although these terms may seem linguistically similar, their usage is deeply tied to context, community, and cultural behavior.

The words and meanings of "Ban/Bon/Van" seen in the Kirat language

Word	Linguistic Groups	Meaning
Bantawa	Rai	"From the Bon" or Bon/Van-Related Ethnic Identity
Banjhankri	All Kirat	Shamani/Spiritual Guru living in the Van
Bon	Limbu/ Tibetan	Tribal Shamanic Religion

Banmaya / Banadevi	Folk Songs/ Myths	Spirit, Vandevi, Guardian Power

These words are used not only as nouns or adjectives in the Kirat linguistic tradition, but they also represent cultural memory (cultural memory) and spiritual structure. As the term 'Banjhankri' refers to the shamanite power living within the Van, the word 'Bon' refers to the name of the original religion prevalent in limbu and ancient Tibetan communities (Tucci, 1980).

Philological Analysis: Sound Evolution (Sound Evolution)

Linguistically, these terms may have evolved from the 'Proto-Kiranti' layer that falls under the Tibeto-Burman language group (van Driem, 2001). In linguistic evolution, the process of changing sounds such as wa/n > ban ban > is considered normal, which occurs with the pronunciation, regional diversity, and time of the language.

For example, the ban sound in proto-Kiranti language is found to be gradually converted to wa or n via van, which is the phonetic shift in the linguistic tendency. This change helps explain the diverse sound forms (variants) seen today in Kirat languages.

It could, therefore, be said that, the pervasiveness of the words Ban or Bon in the Kirat community is not rooted to Vanam in Sanskrit in isolation. Instead, the origin of these sounds probably comes from the original nature of the Kirat indigenous

language culture, which reflects the distinct sound evolution and cultural context.

Comment:

The frequency, meaning, and sound evolution of words such as Bon, Van, or Bon found in Kirat languages shows that these words are not only linguistic structures but also carriers of cultural identity. Due to the antiquity, regional differences, and religious context in the origin of sound, a deeper philological investigation is needed on this subject.

6. "Van" imported from Sanskrit or assimilated from Kirat?

(Borrowing Direction)

In the discussion of the meaning and the emergence of the word Ban, the question as to whether the linguistic transactions took place in Sanskrit to Kirat or vice versa; it is necessary to have the direction of goods and services flows. The assumption which most ancient Indian linguistic studies operated under was that Sanskrit was the ancestor language, but this notion has been countered by recent comparative linguistic studies.

Both linguistically and culturally, the flow question (direction of borrowing not only the question of the linguistic origin of the word Ban but also the direction to come) is both important and interesting. Although Sanskrit has traditionally been viewed as a linguistic resource (donor language), modern linguistic

studies have shown that Sanskrit has a 'substrate effect' of other languages—especially indigenous language groups— (Emeneau, 1956; Masica, 1991). In this context, the question arises whether the Kirat languages are a possible source of origin of the word "Vanam" used in Sanskrit.

6.1 Possibility of Substrate Influence in Sanskrit

Emeneau (1956), defining India as a linguistic region (linguistic area), has argued that Indo-Aryan languages (e.g., Sanskrit) have a profound influence on Dravid, Munda, and other vernacular languages. According to the 'Substrate Theory' presented by him, Sanskrit has assimilated many words from non-Indo-European languages.

Masica (1991) has also confirmed the same claim, noting the prevalence of Dravidian and Munda elements in Sanskrit and other Indo-Aryan languages. Sanskrit is defined in Tamil as "sam+krita", meaning a language made by cooking many languages. Thus linguists consider it appropriate to call Sanskrit a vocabulary rather than just a language (University of Madras, 1924–1936). A large number of non-Veropeli words are found in the Sanskrit language considered to be the Varopeli family (Masica, 1991).

Using the above principles, it seems likely that Sanskrit may have also borrowed some words from the 'Kirat-Tibetan languages' of the pre-Himalayan region. The word "Van", which is found in Vedic Sanskrit as 'vanam', may have evolved independently in Sanskrit

but was assimilated from the Kirat linguistic world. This claim is strengthened when the word "Van" is found more deeply and multifacetedly in kirat oral traditions and social structures, compared to Sanskrit.

On this basis, the Kirat languages—which represent the Kiranti branch that belongs to the Tibetan-Burmese language family —from which it seems strongly likely that Sanskrit borrowed words. The word "van" is one such possible example, which is found in Sanskrit as 'vanam', but its use in Kirat languages is widespread, outdated and multifaceted.

6.2 Probability verified by reference

Kirat oral literature—especially mundhum/ mundum— uses the term "van" not as a general geographical indicator, but rather as a site of sacred origin, a dwelling place of spirit and divinity. This usage is culturally profound, which is different from the usual Van definition of "vanam" found in Sanskrit.

Similarly, a linguistic analysis of a thar-name such as "Bantawa" reveals the social memory of its original "Ban + Tawa" → "from the Van" or "inhabitants of the Van area." This surname is not just an ethnic identity but a cultural history of geography and spiritual origin. The name Bantawa reflects the social, cultural, and ethnic value of the word "Van"—and among the Kirat population, the Van is understood as a symbol associated with purity, origin, and spiritual balance.

Moreover, in the Kirat community, the word "Van" is established not only as an image of a common

Van Van but also as a symbol of purity, power, and conservation. In Sanskrit where we commonly find word vanam being used as a geography synonym the context in which this term is used in Kirat society is more profound and more symbolic in the spiritual as well as cultural sense.

These facts suggest that the meaning which assumes that the word Van is merely a word concerning the local environment in Sanskrit might be partial. Instead, the term is deeply rooted in the cultural structure, mythic consciousness, and linguistic history of the Kirat languages.

Comment

In the context of linguistic borrowing, the argument that the word "Van" is a word assimilated by Sanskrit from the linguistic-cultural system, rather than from Sanskrit to Kirat, is strengthened by today's linguistic evidence. This points to the need to rethink the traditional view of the 'linguistic center-frontier'—where Sanskrit can be understood not only as a "visitor source language" but also as an "acceptor language".

7. Sanskrit and Bon/Kirat: Which one is old?

According to Witzel (1995) the Sanskrit language, particularly vedic Sanskrit, spoken in the RigVeda is considered the oldest written Indo-Aryan language in history (\~1500 BCE). It is traced back to the development with Vedic civilization and Brahmin tradition. However, although the written evidence of Sanskrit is outdated, it does not self-prove antiquity or

originality toward languages based on other oral traditions.

Kirat languages—especially the Kiranti language branch (the native language of Rai, Limbu, etc.)—are not based on writing, but from a linguistic point of view, these languages are thought to have evolved at the 'Proto-Kiranti' level from about 2500 BCE or earlier (van Driem, 2001). These languages belong to the 'Tibeto-Burman' language family, which developed before the Indo-Aryan languages (Benedict, 1972).

Similarly, Kirat's original religious tradition Bon religion (Bon religion) is considered to be an older, pre-Buddhist Shamani religion than Buddhism (Snellgrove, 1967; Tucci, 1980). Bon religion has a deep presence of spirit, nature, and ancestor worship—which is similar to the Mundhum/Mundum' culture of the Kirat community. Both history and linguistics show evidence that all of these traditions were established prior to the Indo-Aryan civilization.

In reality, therefore, the generalization of "Sanskrit old, the rest new" is not balanced linguistically or culturally. Rather, bon dharma and kirat mundum sanskars are older, original rites than Sanskrit and Vedic influences (Waters, 2004).

Similarly, since the word "vanam" (vanam) is found in Sanskrit, the belief that its origin is in Sanskrit may be linguistically flawed. Modern linguistics calls such a process 'substrate borrowing'—where dominant language assimilates words from older vernaculars

(Emeneau, 1956; Masica, 1991). Since the word "Van" is already used as a religious-cultural symbol in the Kirat/Bon culture, Sanskrit may have borrowed the word from an indigenous source.

Comment:

Although Sanskrit is old in writing, Kirat languages may be even older based on oral tradition and linguistic evidence. Bon religion and Kirat Mundum rites are part of the pre-Vedic Shamani tradition. Words such as "Van" are highly likely to be assimilated by Sanskrit from the local language.

8. Conclusion: Anthropocentric linguistic analysis

(Humanistic-Linguistic Conclusion)

Based on this study, the explanation of the origin of the word "Van" is incomplete and one-sided when understood only by being limited to a similar dictionary of Sanskrit language. Although the word "vanam" appears in Sanskrit from old Vedic texts (Witzel, 1995), this fact alone does not ensure that the originality of that word is in Sanskrit. According to the principle of "substrate borrowing" in linguistics, the possibility that a dominant language can assimilate words from other old, scriptless languages is acceptable (Emeneau, 1956; Masica, 1991).

The kirat community's original languages and rituals—such as Bantawa (Van+Tawa), Bon (Shamani Dharma), and Banjhankri (Vanguru)—are linked to the natural environment. These words are deeply rooted

in the Kiranti language branch, especially in the Bantawa, Samsharik and Limbu languages, whose phonetic, cultural and religious usage can go back to the Proto-Kiranti period (~2500 BCE) or earlier (van Driem, 2001; Benedict, 1972).

Bon religion and Mundhum/Mundum rites are a continuation of pre-Buddhist Shamani traditions older than Sanskrit-Vedic influences (Snellgrove, 1967; Tucci, 1980). In the Kirat community, the word "Van" is present not only as a geographical location, but as a sacred force, spiritual protector, and cultural faith-center. It is used in dialogue with nature and spirit—much deeper than the usual meaning of cultural "vanam."

So it can be said that:

- Although the word "Van" is similar in Sanskrit, its basis may be deeply rooted in kirat/bon originality, phonetic transformation, and religio-cultural meaning- detail.

- The possibility that Sanskrit has assimilated the word "Van" from the local indigenous linguistic structure is strong, which is an example of a substrate influence in the linguistic history of India.

- The original knowledge, linguistic traditions, and mythical beliefs of the Kirat community have played an independent and fundamental role in the creation of linguistic heritage—which appears to have influenced not only ancient Sanskrit, but the entire South Asian linguistic development.

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Introduction to the Author

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